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ABSTRACT

The views of incoming college freshmen at the College of Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, about the adequacy of their preparation in language were assessed as part of the college's annual 1978 entrance testing program. Students were asked to write an essay on this topic, along with a second essay about the value of a college education, which is described in a separate report. Three distinct groups of students were identified: those who felt unready and unable to cope with college-level reading and writing assignments (53 percent); those who had rated themselves as prepared for college course work (26 percent); and those who failed to answer the test question as directed (20 percent) (instead of discussing their language ability or preparedness, these students talked about language competence or education generally). The factors to which students attributed their language difficulties were classified into the following eight categories: lack of instruction, automatic promotion, students' personal shortcomings, overcrowding, teachers' incompetence, use of nonprint insturctional materials, home environment, and the media. Lack of instruction and practice in earlier schooling was named most often (44.5 percent of all complaints). Students' perceptions of their problems with regard to speaking, reading, and writing, and anticipated consequences of their language problems, are considered, along with their views of the contributing factors, based on unedited excerpts from their essays. Entrance test scores and the sex ratio of students of the three types of respondents are compared. (SW)

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READY FOR COLLEGE?

(Freshmen Assess Their Preparation in English)

HE013 605

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March, 1979
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Introduction

It is customary for the College of Cape Breton, like many other post-secondary institutions, to administer some form of entrance test to all incoming freshmen. In September, 1978, I carried out the College's annual entrance testing program, the purpose of which was to sample and evaluate freshman writing and from that sampling, to diagnose students' writing problems.

For the 1978 test, I set students two topics that I thought they would have given some thought to and that they could write about freely. I asked them to write two essays. In the first, they were to evaluate the adequacy of their preparation in language; to say, in short, whether they felt prepared to cope with the reading and writing assignments of the college courses in which they were about to enroll. The second test question asked them to discuss the value of a college education.

Although I had anticipated that what students said about those topics might well be as revealing as how well they wrote, I did not, at that time, foresee this project. However, as I scored the essays, the significance and the remarkable consistency of students' comments moved me to collate, analyse, and publicize students' opinions. This first report is the analysis of students' answers to the first test question; in a subsequent report, I will present the results of their answers to the second.

I found that most of the 265 freshmen who wrote the entrance test were deeply dissatisfied with the state of their language ability and that they were prepared to identify what they perceived as the causes of their difficulties.

What students said about their language levels came as no surprise to me: I, too, have long been aware of the severity of college students' language deficiencies because of my work at the College of Cape Breton's writing clinic and as a result of several years' experience in scoring freshman writing for the College's entrance testing.

Nor was students' analysis of the causes of their problems surprising: many of the students I have tutored at the College's Reading and Writing Development Centre have said as much. In fact, students' criticisms echo the analyses of some of the most respected theorists of language instruction. What was notable in this instance was that so many students proved to be so keenly aware of their language shortcomings, so candid and insightful in their observations about language development, and so outspoken in their criticism of the preparatory schooling, the home environments, and the personal shortcomings to which they attributed their language problems.

That is not to say that the dissatisfaction or criticism was unanimous. On the contrary, many students professed themselves to be satisfied with their language ability; they testified to the inspiration of their teachers and parents; they spoke proudly of their independent efforts toward language improvement; and they wrote approvingly of the

public school curriculum that they had known. Nevertheless, satisfied, approving students were a minority: most students were angry; most felt that they had been short-changed in their language training.

About This Study

My analysis of students' remarks consisted of a few straightforward tasks only. The first, re-reading (and re-reading!) the entrance test essays, allowed me to identify three distinct groups of students: those who felt unready and unable to cope with college-level reading and writing assignments; those who had rated themselves as prepared for college course work; and those who failed to answer the test question as directed. (Instead of discussing their language ability or evaluating their preparedness in language as they had been instructed, students in the third group talked about language competence or education generally; nonetheless, their comments were useful input to this project.)

The second task was to classify, into eight categories, the factors to which students attributed their language difficulties. Next, I compared the entrance test scores and the sex ratio of students in the three main groups of respondents. (I have appended the results of these comparisons.)

Finally, I selected for the body of this report only those student comments that were most revealing. (I have appended the remaining

student comments.) I have not edited students' remarks: they appear complete with the syntactical, grammatical, or spelling errors that are the most compelling evidence of what students say about their language problems.

Findings

1. Response to the Test Question

One hundred forty-one (53%) of the 265 students polled said that, in their own estimation, they were not adequately prepared for the reading and writing assignments that they expected to encounter in college course work.

Sixty-nine students, or 26% of the group questioned, said that they felt adequately prepared to cope with language standards appropriate to college-level courses.

Fifty-five students, or 20% of freshmen questioned, did not answer the test question as instructed.

2. Identification of the Causes of Language Problems

a. Although, as might be expected, all of those who were dissatisfied with their language ability criticized some aspect of their language background, many who felt confident of their ability also identified barriers to language development that they felt had hindered their peers; in addition, those who had misread the test question often laid relevant complaints. My tally of the number of times that each

cause of language problems was cited includes comments from all three groups.

In all, 154 students, or 58% of freshmen surveyed, identified one or more contributors to language incompetence. However, because some students named more than one cause, the total number of complaints extends to 240.

b. Students named eight impediments to language development. Of those, lack of instruction and practice in earlier schooling was named most often - 107 times. That figure represents 44.5% of all complaints.

Four other factors were cited with almost equal frequency: automatic promotion from grade to grade, or as students almost invariably called it, "Pushing kids on" - 36 times (14.8% of complaints); students' lack of industry - 32 times (13.3% of complaints); over crowded classrooms and the consequent loss of individual attention - 24 times (10% of complaints); and teachers' incompetence or indifference - 20 times (8.3% of complaints).

These three factors are named less frequently: "fun" teaching methods that deemphasize language training and underplay the rigour that it demands - 9 times (3.7% of complaints); parents' failure to encourage or model language excellence - 7 times (2.9% of complaints); and finally - only twice (0.8% of complaints) - the competition for students' time from television and other media and the banal language models to which the media subject kids.

c. Students were fairly particular in their identification of the causes of language problems. For example, most (93) cited one factor only - the lack of instruction and practice in preparatory schooling. Forty-seven students limited their criticism to two factors. Furthermore, when two factors were mentioned, one of the pair was usually lack of instruction and practice; for instance, 16 students paired that inadequacy with their admitted indolence; 13 combined it with teachers' incompetence; and 8 linked it with overcrowded classrooms.

Only a handful of students named more than 2 causes: nine cited odd assortments of 3; two cited 4; two, a string of 5; and one student named 6.

LANGUAGE PROBLEMS

> *"A person coming out of a higher education level is not able to perform a educated intelligent transmission of thoughts and ideas that is equal to the level at which the education system requires."*

> *"The absence of acedemic skills is astonishing but truely appearant with the simple writing of a sentence or the giving of a statement."*

About their shortcomings in all aspects of language use, students speak honestly and perceptively.

Speaking

That a surprisingly large number of students call attention to their inability to communicate orally undoubtedly reflects the growing

public and professional concern for this long-neglected aspect of language training. For example, several students regret their inability to converse in any but the dialect of their peers, about anything but the trivia of casual exchanges:

> *I feel as if a part of myself is missing at times. That is I am able to speak quite adequately with someone else who has the same problem as I do. That is, there is a deficiency in my language when it comes to expressing myself to someone else in the terms I want too. However, I am unable to because I don't have enough skill for it.*

> *In my opinion, my education would not enable me to have a discussion with any more learned person, and not have some difficulty in doing so.*

Many other students also lament their inexperience in informal, impromptu speaking or oral reading, and they confess their apprehension at the prospect of having to read aloud or to speak to any audience. As remediation, they urge that public speaking or, in the specialists' jargon, "oracy" be emphasized as part of language training. These three comments are typical:

> *One changed is that, there should be some kind of public speaking coarse. I believe this because, I could never speak in front of a crowd and I know a lot of other people who can't either.*

> *Also lacking in the schools is oral communication. You may have to talk infront of a large group of students once a year and then if you say you don't want to do it they say "fine some other day" so one really doesn't know how to speak to people on a group basis or on a one to one basis either where you have a listener and one who speaks.*

> *Oracy is another aspect of communication that is definitely not stressed in our education. To be able to speak effectively is necessary for any field of work that a student might enter. I feel that oracy is the least stressed aspect of communication .... Very few oral presentations were required of us in high school.*

One student goes so far as to suggest that oracy ought to take precedence over literacy:

> *In my last year of high school, my English Teacher told us that "oracy" should be developed because we lack in it greatly. When he asked us what oracy meant, not one student knew.*
> *.... We can't write every thing we say on to a piece of paper. If we do we're no more developed then the egyptians just discovering the alphabet. I believe spoken language should be more dominant over reading and writing.*

Students' inability to speak effectively and confidently is notable among their concerns, but the frequency and vehemence of their comments reveal that reading and writing problems are uppermost in their perception of their language difficulties.

Reading

In their analysis of their reading difficulties, students distinguish between the two primary reading skills: vocabulary development and reading comprehension.

About the most fundamental aspect of vocabulary development; that is, pronunciation, one student claims:

> *.... a lot of people come into high school not being able to pronounce words or know what the word is.*

From another comes this despairing forecast:

> *So, what is really important is that, if we don't soon smarten up our vocabulary will soon start to regress. Perhaps to the point, maybe thousands of years from now, when once again we will resort to monosylabic grunts to communicate with our fellow man.*

Indeed, anyone who has overheard what passes for conversation among many teenagers or who has agonized with students as they struggle vainly for synonyms for the most common words cannot but agree with that student-writer.

Another student identifies a crucial link between wealth of vocabulary and comprehension:

> *To read in this manner [with comprehension] you must have a functional vocabulary to aid you in your attempts at understanding. In this mode of communication you see more of a variety of ideas open for interpretation.*

The faulty comprehension that a meagre vocabulary almost predestines is a problem that the next two students acknowledge as well:

> *I believe that I am well-read but can not read well, that is, I find that I understand what I am reading in the various novels and magazines I happen to digest throughout the course of a week but that somehow I am missing something.*

> *.... although I can read a book or magazine, I cannot fully understand what a writter may be saying.*

And one student points out what must often be the case when students sit for exams in their academic courses - that uncertain

comprehension of test questions hampers performance:

> *I realize even now that I found it quite difficult to read the above question, and absorb it mentally before reading it over six or seven times.*

His apparent alarm at having to re-read a passage to fully understand it reveals a common misconception: unaware of the complexity of the reading process, many students worry needlessly about having to read reflectively - that is, at having to re-scan a phrase repeatedly. They equate speed in reading with efficiency, not appreciating that mature or technical writing often demands (and repays) deliberate reading; thus, they tend to seek in speed reading programs the cure for what are often very different and more serious reading problems.

The next comment, the last in this series about reading problems, suggests a link between faulty reading and bad writing. This student says:

> *Sometimes, you see things only as you want them to be seen and when reading or writing something, you make it what you want, whether or not that is really what it is. This is what I attribute my sometimes incoherence, and seemingly inadequate reading and writing skills.*

To judge from their comments, most students appreciate the connection between efficient reading and effective writing. Nevertheless, the writing problem emerges as their principal concern.

Writing

Although they recognize several elements of writing, they do not usually distinguish clearly among those sub-skills. Thus, in

acknowledging their writing inadequacies, they do little more than list the generic terms for a variety of writing errors, ranging from faulty organization, incoherence and the catch-all, "bad grammar" to mechanical faults like spelling and punctuation. I have tried to classify their remarks according to those major errors; nevertheless, a good deal of overlap and repetition is evident in the comments that I quote. For example, the following students do not discuss their difficulty in developing a topic only, but that problem does seem to be their major concern.

One "angry young man" vents his frustration at his incoherence:

> *I find it very hard to relate what is in my head, to you, threw the use of English. I probably have the same ideas as every one else, but the problem, is putting it down on paper. You are probably reading this essay with much criticism of the usage of my writing abilities. It is not my fault, that I am making numberless mistakes, and completely going beyond the boundaries of the English language. It is the fault of the school system and their inefficiency ... I know myself that I propably have the writing capabilities of a student of Grade 7, and am very poor in relating, how I feel about the system. I guess you can say, that I am an angry young man, who is not impressed, nor not surprised with the system of teaching.*

In addition, several admit unhappily that they and their classmates:

> *... do not know the proper format of an essay .... do not know how to write a real essay and get the full meaning.*

And one student offers her entrance test essay as proof of her inability to plan or structure a coherent essay:

My personal experience has been that I am unable to write a proper essay. Take this one for instance even with quite clear directions I hardly knew where to begin.

Finally, two more telling observations from students about their inability to write connected prose:

It is often difficult to write in a cohesive and coherent manner when I cannot connect my thoughts and ideas properly.

I feel that my education has failed me badly ... I can express my ideas on paper fairly fluently but still I lack the basic skills to pull it all together and make myself happy with my work.

I know myself that I have a hard time trying to express myself on paper it is usually full of odds and ends that I can't seem to be able to tie them together.

Students also deplore their inability to compose or analyse simple sentences or to spell and punctuate what they write. The comments that follow about grammar and the mechanics of sentence construction are representative.

First, about spelling:

I know from my own experience, that I find it difficult to write down on paper exactly what I have in mind. When I finally do come up with a sentence that says precisely what I want to say I can't spell most of the words.

My reading and writing, especily my spelling are not at the standard they should be at.

I can communicate by speech but when it comes to writing what I am trying to express, then I run into trouble. My spelling and grammar techniques leave a lot to be desired.

And from one boy's experience in high school newspaper work:

> *I asked a large number of high school and junior high school students for a short paragraph, in which they were to express their views on a certain subject. The results were to be published in a newspaper I was preparing.*
>
> *The true Results, I was unable to use any of the material submitted, because of its' poor quality. Not only did I find spelling errors, but the students did not even know how to compose a sentence properly. To say the least I was disappointed and began to wonder how they would be able to read the paper that was being prepared for them.*

A couple of students allege as common among their contemporaries the inability to:

> *.... take a sentence read it, pick out the various parts and their meanings, and interpret it.*

Another reports:

> *I couldn't begin to pick twenty people who could tell me what an object of a preposition is, or what an indirect object is for that matter. All they know are the bare skills and even then just a minimum.*

It is interesting that only one student mentions any writing problem other than those that have to do with organization and mechanics: only one girl names wordiness:

> *.... Some students can write and get across their ideas in relatively few words whereas other can rave on for many pages and get less across to the reader.*

That the verbosity, the "inflated writing" charge appears only once in this out-pouring of self-criticism no doubt indicates that for most students the problem is not how to stop writing but how to begin and how to continue.

The last three comments, in which students admit their weakness in all of the principal elements of writing, are cited here in summary:

> *After attending school for thirteen years I still find it hard to write proper grammatical sentences, use proper punctuation and organize a well constructed essay.*

> *I have very little or no understanding at all of how to use the proper punctuations and structures for writing.*

> *My grammar is poor, my spelling shaky, and I have no idea how to set up an outline, or how to write term papers.*

Consequences of Language Problems

Students were also able to foresee the consequences of their linguistic shortcomings. For example, they anticipated that their language problems cannot but hinder them in college-level assignments. Here are several dire predictions about the fate of the college-bound student who is adrift in the fundamentals of language use.

> *If a student could not read or write adequately, then how could he expect to make any headway when he moved to a place of higher learning. Colleges teach you what you desire to know, but if you lack the ability to comprehend or express clearly this knowledge then the effort is futile.*

> *I think high school graduates have not received the ability to read and write entering a higher level of education, and if they don't develop these basic skills in a lower level of education, they are going to find it very difficult to learn these skills in a higher level of education.*

> *When you come from school you are no way ready for college, you are spoon feed at school but college do everything for your self, if you miss something to bad for you.*

The next student, though he claims that his "*ability to write and speak allows [him] to survive from one day to the next with no real problems*", he anticipates that it will not equip him to cope with college coursework:

> *But now since I'm entering college I forced to say "no", I'm not prepared because of the stories I've heard of how hard college is.*

At college, more than during their public schooling, these students believe, language difficulties will penalize them:

> *not only in English but in every course you attempt.*

They anticipate that in the more demanding college courses:

> *... a report handed in that is messy, unorganized or badly spelled*

will cost them dearly.

Furthermore, students expect that their language problems will make obtaining and holding a job more difficult. Graduates of the current system, forecasts one student:

> *... will be entering the job world perhaps not being able to read aloud, spell relatively simple words and maybe write a composition on what they did last summer.*

And since they believe that language competence is increasingly a requirement in all jobs, "*From electrical technology to newspaper reporters*", language inability will hinder the job seeker's prospects

from the outset. For example, one student foresees that:

> *You even require it [language competence] for an interview. The way you speak tells a person a great deal about how well you read and write.*

Another reports that even the matter of:

> *Writing a letter to a prospective employer is a difficult task for a student with a grade twelve education, many students are rejected on their applications alone. Unemployment forms filled out inadequately are common and students miss chances of prospective employment.*

Besides their implications for advanced education and for employment, language deficiencies, say students, are detrimental to personal growth. In fact, if we can judge by the earnestness of students' remarks, this third consequence of language problems - that they cloud decisions and inhibit action - is perhaps their most severe penalty. For example, his language inadequacies can short-circuit a student's exchanges, even with his peers:

> *Many students after finishing high school are unable to communicate with one another properly, because they have not learned to use their native language properly.*

> *[they] hamper a student's ability, or anyone else's ability, to make themselves understood. Many people often become frustrated with something if they feel that no-one understands what they are trying to explain when they can't get their point across.*

Language difficulties can even restrict personal correspondence, as one student points out:

> *... if it is just writing a letter to a friend or receiving one, you need to read and write.*

Another student's astute observation is that language shortcomings can lead to an unfortunate choice of career or associates:

> *If 13 years of teaching have caused students not to be able to pick out the main ideas and themes of novels and plays, what hope is there for us to be able to pick out proper jobs and associates for ourselves and be assured of success rather than immense failure due to the fact that we think we are knowledgeable but in reality are truely lacking.*

As he implies, bad reading and writing often accompany the crooked thinking that can spell personal disaster.

Finally, several students describe the self-doubt and self-criticism that can immobilize the language-disabled. For instance, the next student admits difficulty in accomplishing the most routine language-dependent tasks:

> *Here I am a high school graduate and I'm not sure if I can correctly write a business letter, carry on an intelligent conversation or read a book and understand it.*

Another speculates about the cause of his language weaknesses:

> *Our education has left us sadly in the lurch. Students have a strong feeling of insecurity as to their abilities. They are never sure as to the reasons for their failure. Is it me or is it my education?*

As he intimates, students' dilemma is to decide whether their language problems stem from educational factors beyond their control or whether they are symptoms of a flaw in their own intellectual make-up. In fact, the dread that they themselves are fundamentally defective

haunts many high school graduates:

> *Then when [a student] gets out of high school and still doesn't know how to read or write, then he'll be lost and wonder what happened.*

That fear can make students so agonizingly self-conscious of their deficiencies that they retreat from the very influences and models that they most need to overcome their problems. Here is one student's breathless impression of what her contemporaries' language problems cost them in self-confidence:

> *I must add that I find that today's education has failed to help a majority of students in a very important thing and without it you cannot get along in society, it is confidence. To be without confidence is to be in a shell gasping for air but afraid to open it up for fear that you will open it wrong and someone will be there to critize you for it. I have seen too many students in that position. How can a person expect to be heard without being able to speak, read and write for lack of confidence?*

Throughout the remarks presented here, students' message has been that deficiencies in all aspects of language retard educational and vocational progress as well as personal growth: the word is that if a student cannot:

> *... talk, read and write affluently .... it is pointless to go further, for without them, we are lost.*

Certainly, a few students assert their freedom from the language problems that plague most of their fellows. Some of those claims are, in fact, substantiated by the quality of their writing. In other cases, however, there tends to be a worrisome discrepancy between the confidence

of the claim and the competence of its delivery. For example, one student proclaims:

> *I like to read and do read a lot, causing me to develope my reading ability to the peak they are at now.*

Another brashly maintains:

> *I am totaly convinced I am prepared, as far as literary skills go, to enter a post secondary institution and maintain the literary standards that are required. From that institution I could also go to a job and also meet with their standards. The flaws of not being able to read or write might be in the system but they're not in me.*

CONTRIBUTING FACTORS

LACK OF INSTRUCTION AND PRACTICE

> *"If more time was put in to teaching and practising these skills then students today would be better off."*

Most of the high school graduates polled in this survey attributed their language problems to a single cause - the absence of regular, prolonged instruction and practice. They say, in short, that the main reason today's high school graduates cannot read or write effectively is that they have not done enough of either during their public schooling.

The language training that they have had has been, they allege, inconsistent: emphasized in elementary school but neglected thereafter.

Students appreciate the importance of the early start in language development that their elementary schooling provided: for

example, one student reasons:

> *If students are taught even the basics at an early age they are more likely to catch on. When they are taught more complicated material, ...because then, it's just a continuation of something they have already started.*

But students are just as aware that the effectiveness of that initiation depends on its reinforcement in subsequent grades. And it's that continuity, they charge, that is missing:

> *In the elementary school they start teaching you how to read and write properly. It is a good start, but once you get to high school it stops.*

Another student notes the waning of oral reading in the public school curriculum:

> *During my first few years of school the teachers would get everyone to read a few lines from his book. I enjoyed doing this and I think everyone else did. But, in my later years, teachers gradually stoped asking us to read. I guess they thought that if we don't know how to read by now, we never will. Some teachers were scared to ask some of the students because every time they did the student would say 'I can't read', or 'I hate reading.'*

Students report a similar erosion of writing instruction:

> *When we entered the latter part of elementary writing, spelling and a little bit of grammar came into being, Then there was high school, grammar seemed to be nearly out of the picture by then.*

> *We were taught enough in the lower grades to get us through to high school ... When we reached high school we had to struggle through high school on the language skills we learned in the lower grades.*

And finally, this recollection of the gradual deemphasis of language instruction in public school:

> *In the early grades I seem to remember a grammar book but as I advanced to higher grades this seem to fade away ... my problem in these years was do to the lack of basic skills in the classroom. During this time students lose touch with the basic skill of reading and writing.*

Most respondents placed at the end of the elementary school years the point at which regular language instruction and opportunity for practice are dropped. However, a few indicate that language training continues through junior high at least:

> *In junior high grammar is taught but once you reach grade eleven and twleve much is forgotten and rarely reviewed.*

Wherever the cut-off actually occurs - after elementary school or not until after junior high school - students seem exasperated that language training should have been abandoned just when they needed it most - to prepare for high school or college-level reading and writing assignments. One boy grumbles:

> *The teaching of this ability to comprehend and communicate decrease as his need for these skills increases.*

Two other girls are more explicit:

> *By the time I reached high school it seemed like we had completely lost our grammar and basic writing skills, and they weren't being taught in high school. Ironically, the teachers now expected more out of us in this area ... and we could not live up to their expectations. It seemed that even the English teachers were constantly complaining of how we couldn't get our ideas across well, yet it wasn't in the curriculum to teach us these skills.*

> *Its true students can neither read textbooks adequately nor write coherently. Once this year a grade 12 class was given a lecture on writing, they were called stupid, but its hard to explain, you don't really do alot in your senior years. You are just like little babies leaving school and going to start at something new all over again ....*

It is not as though language instruction never again appears in the public school curriculum after the early grades. In fact, several students report that short-term instruction in grammar comprised a unit of their high school English course. But such "refresher" courses are special measures, often isolated from other coursework and, as students point out, inadequate to overcome what for many is a lifelong linguistic lag: one student explains:

> *Starting to teach students grammar in junior high or high school is difficult as they have already formed bad speaking or writing habits that will be difficult to break, to say the least.*

The implication of three other comments is that short-term instruction is ineffectual:

> *In my high school it was just my graduate year that English grammar and spelling was pushed upon me. This is to late; much to late in my education to receive this ....*

> *Just this year, grammar books became a part of the program, but then again there wasn't enough time put aside to really get a meaning of it all. In the program there was some writing of essays and reading. But not enough to say one had a great deal of practice. For instance a term paper was to be written in the last year of high school, where as there should have been term papers written through out high school so the student can know what to expect when he or she enters university for the first time.*

> *I can remember only three years in which I was taught grammar and reading skills. One of these years was the final year of high school and was the year I felt that I learned the most about proper grammar. Most of the skills I should have learned and developed all through school were thrown at me in one year. Perhaps this is an admission to the fact that a definite mistake was made in not allowing more time for proper training in the literary avenues of reading and writing.*

What students have been saying is that notwithstanding the grounding in language that elementary school may provide and in spite of occasional crash courses in grammar in later years, language training does not dominate the public school curriculum as it must to ensure language competence. One student seems simply to throw up her hands at the public school's erratic approach to language development. She concludes:

> *It just seems clear to myself that it is the short amount of time the school allows for the learning and development of our reading and writing skills which causes people to be unprepared for the society they live in.*

Students speculate about the reasons for the spottiness of their training in language. First, they suggest that the deemphasis may stem from a combination of educators' attitudes about language development: for example, the assumption that language proficiency is a skill that can be instilled routinely in the elementary grades and safely neglected thereafter. As one student says:

... after grade seven or eight you were expected to have conquered the art of reading and writing.

In the words of another:

Some teachers feel that once it is taught in the lower grades students will automatically remember them.

Or it may be that, as one student quoted earlier suggested, the extent of the problem is thought to preclude remediation in high school:

I guess they thought that if we don't know how to read by now, we never will.

A great many students offer a second explanation for the subordination of language training: there isn't enough time for language training, they contend, because the curriculum is cluttered by courses in which language development is not the primary objective. As one student reports:

Today there is so much offered in schools that they are getting away from reading and writing.

The curriculum's first commitment, students charge, is not to language growth but rather, to the mastery of content in the traditional school subjects and in the proliferating innovative programs as well. As a result, language instruction is shouldered aside. From accounts like those that follow we learn what it is that students are doing at school when they are not learning to read and write and speak:

> *If [a student] is inefficient in those skills he will steer away from all language courses and take sciences that most often require little skill in reading and writing at the high school level.*

> *Instead of basic English being emphasized in the schools from my experience its been Greek mythology, Biblical literature and Ethics or Drama. Basic English is so low on the list that most people think its just for low grade students and consequently basic English is put by the wayside.*

> *... during my high school reading and writing were not greatly stressed. More priority was given to other subjects such as math and science and even in these subjects it wasn't very important the level of your reading and writing skills you expressed.*

Even the core curriculum courses, students allege, distract because, instead of encouraging exploratory reading that would demonstrate the inter-relatedness of school subjects while developing language ability, they demand memorization of particular sets of facts:

> *In school we spend too much time memorizing history dates and chemical formulas which to some People is useless in future years, whereas reading and writing will always be helpful.*

And another student attests to the uselessness of 'subject facts':

> *My own feelings about what my schooling did for me are that, it is at the present time to me just information. I am not saying it is not good. I am saying it is useless to me.*

Nor for the next boy is acquisition of facts - seemingly the emphasis in school courses - a primary concern: his worry is that he

hasn't had the language training that would enable him to use the information that he has acquired from those courses:

> *In todays Education system I believe we are learning quite a lot about our envirment, politics, economy, ourselves, chemistry, etc. But do I have the proper training to convay this information to someone else. I know that the Nova Scotia School System has left me raped of the basic skills in writting and public speaking.*

Students assert that the acquisition and memorization of facts have become the principal objectives of the English curriculum as well: in English courses, they say, fundamental language training has been sacrifised to practice in literary criticism. In fact, it is of the literary content, which they claim dominates the English curriculum, that students are most scathing. These complaints are typical:

> *I think that being thought more about vocabulary and writting skills will help us a lot more in life than MacBeth or Julius Ceasar will ever help us.*

> *... the more "with-it" teachers would do some idiotic poetry and try to derive some meaning.*

> *As far as oral reading or speaking went, students might read a line or two of Shakespeare (great for everyday use!) or even make a three minute speech once a year. Now that's good for those three minutes but not so great for the rest of one's life.*

> *In high school english classes are concerned with William Shakespeare, analyzing poetry and short stories. This is fine for students wishing to enter english related careers. What about us who enter the sciences? Reading and writing is what we need.*

Those charges imply that the study of English has been narrowed to the study of literature only, a focus that elevates a specialty, literary criticism, over general improvement of student writing. Such specialization - what one critic called the "worship of English as an art form" - has meant that all that many students retain of their English courses is, by their own admission, *"a line or two of Shakespear or some poem"* even as what they take away from other school courses is an odd assortment of *"history dates and chemical formulas"*.

Students advance a third reason for the absence of language training in the public school curriculum. Language competence, they claim, is unnecessary for promotion and graduation: the public school's methods of assessing performance down-grade and at times eliminate the need for language proficiency.

In other words, students say that you don't have to be literate to get through school: listening, luck and longevity - not literacy - they suggest, are the prerequisites for secondary school success.

It is no longer startling to hear that demonstrable language proficiency is not a requirement for graduation: the prevalence of low language test scores and the mounting din of employers' complaints have foreshadowed these students' comments; nevertheless, the message from these recent high school graduates is:

> *It is so easy to complete our high school education, without properly exemplifying true reading or writing abilities, that once we reach college level we are almost lost.*

From another, a more pointed observation:

> *I have noticed that when you reach high school writing, and reading are not a basic requirement to get through. There is not much time spent on reading. These are not really expected of you at that point.*

But how can a student pass a course without having had to read widely? one boy explains:

> *.... some subjects don't require it, and some require only to be able to listen.*

What he seems to be saying is that in some courses the teachers' lectures gave him all the information that he needed to pass their tests. Thr next girl appears to be making the same point:

> *... in high school you're told what to write down.*

As does this student:

> *Reading is also a problem for most students. But that also should be of no surprise. How can one expect a student to read when all information is "spoon fed."*

In other words, the oral explication that lectures provide, though intended only to elaborate material already read, actually tends to supplant independent reading. Students concede that were they dependent on their ability to extract the same information through their own reading, many of them would fail the subject tests.

As the lecture method can conceal reading problems, so multiple-choice testing can mask problems in writing; in fact, objective tests obviate the need to write:

"Short answer" and "True and False" tests have limited students ability to write especially to get a point across.

Students do not get enough opportunities to practice whatever writing skills they may have. Most of the tests that they write are "fill-in-the-blanks."

The latter student introduces an important incidental point: essay examinations are more than tests of content mastery; they also provide writing practice. In a curriculum where in-course writing is rare, the essay exam may be one of the few remaining opportunities for students to gain writing experience; thus, its substitution by objective tests may further deprive students of practice and to that extent, aggravate their writing problems. One student puts it succinctly:

There are very few essay questions on our tests so little writing was required.

Then, what about the essays that students do write, however infrequently, for their school courses? One might assume that in those assignments, writing problems do surface and that they are identified and candidly assessed. Not so, say students, for students' errors, though perceived, are subordinated to the 'ideas' in the essay; accordingly, identification of 'ideas' outweighs the quality of their presentation; content becomes distinct from and superior to form and ultimately, form becomes dispensable. One student describes the practice:

Most students also fail to work on these skills because society academically today seems to push more towards what is written and how it is marked. It would not be marked as high if it work marked on construction as on content.

Here's that point again, more explicitly:

> *Essays written in most courses are graded on the basis of content with no accent on presentation.*

Yet, although students criticize what they perceive as the cluttered and language-poor curriculum for having deprived them of language training, they do not advocate the abandonment of math or history or any other school subject in favour of language arts courses. On the contrary, they readily acknowledge the value of the traditional courses and of the more innovative programs as well:

> *Of course we did learn .... We had creative drama courses in our English curriculum which were good, as we learned to communicate with people.*

Furthermore, they identify the drawbacks of formal instruction in grammar. Says one girl:

> *Learning the rules of grammar only is just like learning words but not putting them into sentences.*

The next student suggests that formal instruction in grammar is but another content course in which the emphasis in once more on analysis and memorization rather than on production:

> *I was taught how to take sentences apart, instead of how to put them together, what the words of a sentence are called, instead of what they mean.*

In the opinion of another student, courses in grammar:

> *leave the student much more confused, knowing the general rules of grammar but not enough to write coherently.*

Neither the addition of grammar not the deletion of competing traditional school courses, say students, will enhance language skill. Rather, they advocate the incorporation of language training in all public school courses: the implementation - or the restoration - of a language-oriented curriculum which would assign to teachers of all courses the responsibility for students' language welfare. As one girl insists:

> *The proper use of grammar should be integrated into all courses rather than being pinpointed in English only.*

The integration that would make school courses the means to language development will be achieved, students argue, only if current priorities are reordered to accord language training dominance in the curriculum and if that dominance is reflected in teaching methods and garding standards. Or as three students put it:

> *In my opinion reading and writing should be the most important part of students education. When we have mastered the basics we may go on to more advanced areas of learning.*

> *Basic skills of reading and writing are one of the most valuable tools, and stress should be appointed to concerning this factor.*

> *It is my opinion that reading should be the basis of any education system - it should be given top priority. This is only common sense. How should a student be expected to comprehend grade XII science if he is reading on a grade X level? That is nonsense.*

AUTOMATIC PROMOTION

> *"Too many teacher's are pushing too many pupils through grades that should have been repeated."*

Thirty-six students, many of whom had already identified lack of instruction and practice as a cause of their language problems, went on to cite automatic promotion or as they invariably called it,"pushing kids through", as another major hindrance in their language development.

Students elaborate variously. One girl says:

The skills being taught today to us are a lot more indulging.

Another explains:

The educational system is too easy .... too loose and flexable.

The same point is made in this longer commentary:

The system has slackened, the rigid rules are gone. The standard of education has decreased so much that although there are less of us illiterate, there are more of us ignorant.

The "looseness", the "flexibility" that students decry is evident, they contend, in the public school's evaluation procedures. For example, the next student asserts that the local tests that have replaced the Provincial examinations are less demanding:

> *[In the past] more was required of the students, Provincial examinations were an example of this. These examinations compeled students to read their textbooks, endeavoring to learn even more than their teachers had taught them. Much more studying was required to pass these exams than the examinations of today's high schools.*

What students perceive as the over-indulgence of another school practice also comes under criticism: the array of course options is so varied, they say, that it allows them to elect those that do not demand language competence:

> *Today, I believe it is much easier to graduate from high school. Schools today allow more freedom to students in terms of selection of subjects and it is easy for the lazier students to have subjects which require little work for a pass. A large number of students, especially in high school will work only as hard as they have to, to maintain a pass or a little bit over a pass.*

To "get everyone through", deficiencies must be disregarded and standards relaxed: students contend that that accomodation has characterized their public schooling. Here is a string of comments on that theme:

> *What happens is this: the slow readers are passed on to the next grade along with the rest, never getting the attention they need. They will end up in high school working on a junior high reading level.*

> *In our school we are not on a high level of learning. We do just whats in the book and thats not in no great detail ... Nowadays you just do the book to as far as you get.*

> *The student continues through grade school passing each grade, year by year, and carried with him his inability to, let us say, read or write properly. By the time that person reaches high school there is little hope of his skills in reading and writing improving.*

I think the school system is responsible for those who have skimmed through, and still can not express themselves in words.

The education system has let far too many people slip through who simply have too many blank spots in that part [reading and writing] of their education.

Several students offer evidence that automatic promotion is ingrained in the local school system; that it happens "*right here in Sydney*". One testifies:

In high school I've been aware of those who could not read, write, etc. on a level greater than that of a child in elementary school.

Another reports:

I have watched a boy going into high school not being able to read properly. Now they'll just push him through high school for the sake of doing it.

The next student offers himself as an illustration:

.... almost any person can graduate from high school with a minimum of effort. I know this for a fact as I can cite myself as an example.

The consensus is that automatic promotion means that:

... it is not too difficult to graduate without learning a thing.

Students foresee the consequences of automatic promotion, and in their opinion, teachers who 'push kids on':

are hurting them more than helping them.

The next also points out that:

because of this pushing the students are the ones who are going to suffer

Yet, he anticipates that:

.... these problems may be corrected through college.

However, several of his fellows are not as sanguine. One reasons that:

With the great increase in attendance at college during the past ten years or so, it seems that the college degrees are not worth so much.

A second boy puts it more bluntly:

Schools are handing out too many "Mickey Mouse" diplomas and it only stands to reason that soon colleges will follow suite.

Was it ever really different? Were standards once less lax? Was language ability ever the primary criterion for promotion and graduation? These students think so. For instance, one boy contends that:

Years ago you might not off been as advanced but learning you were there for and I think the books were harder.

Or more explicitly:

.... it was just recently that I was talking to some elders about there high school days and one of the main arguments of the conversations was that how much more strict there educational system was. What is meant here is that in earlier years, the students were never pushed ahead if they could not get something, they stuck with the problem until it was conquered ....

What can be done to restore the emphasis that students believe once goverened the curriculum? What can be done to regulate promotion? Students' suggestion is for a general tightening up. A recurring admonition is that:

> *obtaining a high school diploma should be much more difficult.*

One boy acknowledges that such tightening might "*discourage some from entering high school*", but, he insists, "*if it does, they probably didn't belong there anyway.*"

Students maintain that standards must be upgraded at all levels:

> *If a student whether in grade two or ten is not at average or passing grade, he should not go on to higher level work.*

For students, the ultimate solution to the problem of automatic promotion is that:

> *The Department of Education should tighten up their standards on at least two of the three R's.*

STUDENTS' PERSONAL SHORTCOMINGS

> *"I cannot blame everything on the teacher or the system because to a certain extent learning to read and write is up to the person."*

A substantial number of students polled (32) are prepared to share the blame for their language problems. They readily concede that

language development is largely a matter of self-help, that lack of initiative or perseverance can hamper a student as surely as do the external impediments that they identify.

Self-propelled language development requires self-discipline. Students deliver themselves of some pretty weighty pronouncements about self-discipline: For example, according to one girl:

> *Self-discipline is the key to any student's success. With that extra bit of discipline imposed by one's self, a person can do well.*

Here is a much lengthier and loftier version of that theme:

> *I feel that the academic level attained by high school graduates today is mainly the fruit of their own work and ambition. Schools and teachers provide the medium to work in and the incentive in the early years but as high school unfolds, teacher-student relationships deteriorate and the student becomes more independent, it is his duty to set his goals and attain them. He may or may not do this .... I am not criticizing teachers, they are doing their jobs but it all depends on the student. If he wants to learn and develop his skills, he will apply himself and work with the teacher and the school to achieve his goals. If he does not wish to learn, he may simply sit back and have a good time.*

Nor are students limited to such sweeping generalizations about self-discipline. As they translate the concept into more precise terms, self-discipline, or self-direction, means, among other things, seeking other sources of information to reinforce and extend school-taught skills and content. As one girl notes:

> *... school will not do it all for you.*

In the words of another:

... its what you introduce yourself to in your day to day life that prepares yourself for society.

Another reasons:

Education doesn't conclude at 3:15, one must seek other sources of information.

He goes on to suggest a few of the most profitable sources:

.... A good beginning is to register at a local library at an early age.

The media is an essential part of our growth. Newspapers, radios and televisions provide innumerable opportunities for expansion.

Throughout, students emphasize that independent reading is the key to language development as well as to mastery of school content. One advises:

Reading more books on our own time may be one way to correct this [literacy problem].

From three others, similar observations:

Education not only occurs in the classroom but at home as well. People that want to better themselves and improve their reading and writing skills, have lots of opportunities to do so by picking up a book, magazine or a newspaper and reading it.

Because of the abundance of reading material available today it is easier for a person to acquire reading skills ....

> *What a student does after the dismissal bell rings in the afternoon, on weekends, and summer vacations is also important .... Reading books other than textbooks is also important, it broadens your knowledge and increases your vocabulary.*

All of these students arrive at two conclusions. First:

> *.... by the time we reach high school we should be able to take it upon ourselves to further our skills in reading and writing if we feel we need it.*

And second:

> *.... if people take the time to read and possibly write in their spare time then they will be using what they learned beneficially.*

Furthermore, they point out that a number of factors - the deemphasis of language training in the schools and the loss of individual attention in crowded classes chief among them - conspire to make self-development more necessary today than ever before:

> *... the fact that emphasis on writing and reading has declined greatly in schools means that the student, himself has a greater responsibility because he must acquire on his own what he does not acquire in school.*

> *This lack of teaching at the junior and senior high school levels means the the student must expand his vocabulary and writing skills on his own.*

Several students report having undertaken such self-development, and they testify to its importance in their performance. One says:

> *What reading I did not do in school I did at home on my own time.*

Another testifies to the benefit of even a brief self-development program:

> *Since my graduation in June, I have tried to improve my education. I have read books on how to read faster, how to write with style, and how to write more clearly. I feel I have benefitted more from one summer of personal instruction than from 13 years of school.* *

But according to most students, that kind of industry is exceptional: they claim that what one student called, "*sitting back and having a good time*" has become the most popular option in the public school curriculum. After school hours, too, they say, the hedonistic outlook is general among students.

Students deplore what they regard as laziness and indifference among their fellows. One girl describes the phenomenon in medical terms: her diagnosis is that today's students are striken with, "*the illness known as lack of desire*". Another observer reports that the victims of that disease:

> *... feel that doing the minimum amount of work is sufficient, thus this leads to deterioration of their abilities.*

Unfortunates afflicted by 'lack of desire' suffer, we are told, from this delusion:

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* The books that the student refers to are part of a pre-entrance reading list that the College of Cape Breton mails to all prospective registrants.

They have the notion that school is a time for fun, to meet people, to talk, to participate in sports, and the idea of actually learning from textbooks is shoved to the backgrounds of their minds.

Apparently, the disease is epidemic in the schools in industrial Cape Breton.

Yet, there is an obvious concomitant of students' earnest self-criticism: to persist, students' idolence must be condoned and indulged in the schools. Two students claim that the school's permissiveness amounts to tacit approval of student's laxity:

Today's students are apathetic where their studies are involved. When one considers that for most English courses the pass is fifty percent and a mark of sixty percent will be accepted by a college it is no wonder students are content to "get by" with the least possible effort.

Many students have graduated from high school, passing their courses, but not fully gaining any profound knowledge. No doubt they may have read what they were instructed to read but not any extra which could have given them more insight on their own lives ...

The next student refers to that connection as well. Furthermore, he implies that how one ultimately apportions the blame for students' language shortcomings does little to mitigate them:

I feel a bit guilty placing all the blame on the school system. Responsibility was placed on my shoulders and I failed to follow through thus, it is as much my falt as it is the education system but either way I feel I lack much when it comes to reading and writing.

OVERCROWDING

> *"I think the key to this [students' language problems] is the lack of attention that can be provided to a student by a teacher."*

Twenty-four students attribute their language difficulties, at least indirectly, to the overcrowding that they had experienced during their public schooling. Teacher cutbacks, moratoriums on school construction and other recent austerity measures, they argue, create impossibly high student-teacher ratios that short-change students and teachers alike. The next student offers this opinion:

> *.... It is hard to teach 1000 students and expect all of them to come out at the same level of education. In fact it is impossible.*

Other student-writers recall classes of 50, 40, or 30. All of those groups, they say, are too large:

> *When a teacher handles a class with up to 50 students, how can it be expected that the teacher have enough time to cater to all of his students?*

> *The ratio must be a lot smaller. One teacher to forty students is a farce.*

> *The problem seems to be, in my mind, 'massive scale education'. Looking back to my earlier grades I see a large classroom filled with about thirty-two students; all the attention is towards one teacher ... I personally feel its is impossible for one teacher, in a class, to attend to the needs of each and every child.*

In describing experiences in over-crowded classrooms, one student recalls frustration at the loss of personal attention that often attends high student-teacher ratios:

> *Education has become too impersonal .... In some places you are not regarded as a person but as a number. But in reality you are a person!*

Another suggests that:

> *... overcrowded schools ... may account for the deterioration of student-teacher relationships.*

And students appreciate that teachers, too, are penalized by the jamming in their classrooms. As one puts it:

> *... there is greater pressure on teachers who are losing the once available individual attention given to the samaller number of students a decade ago.*

But for students, overcrowding's greatest penalty is that it robs them of the time and attention that they need to overcome their academic failures by learning to read and write competently. Here are four descriptions of the toll that students say overcrowding takes:

> *[a student] may have trouble in their reading skills, the teacher may try to help, but with the cutbacks of teachers today, special attention is unseen of because classes are too jammed.*

> *Nowadays the one on one communicating is gone, so that the teacher never knows a student's weaknesses and therefore can never try to solve the problem.*

> *[The emphasis] was not put on the student as an individual. By this statement I mean that not enough individualistic attention was given to the students, and as a result they suffered in their education.*
>
> *.... the teacher does not have the time to aid individuals who need extra help, and the little time he does have cannot be shared equally among the students. Somebody is getting cheated.*

Because harried teachers cannot devote sufficient time and attention to their students' language deficiencies, minor problems go unnoticed or are ignored and in either case, remain uncorrected and thus become ingrained. This student's comment is typical:

> *It is almost impossible to get the personal attention one needs. Because of this a little fault picked up in elementary school could blossom into a chaos that would hamper a person for a lifetime because it was not corrected. Also because of this one can miss things in class which the teacher would not have time to redo because of the large numbers. A student could easily fall into bad reading and writing habits which could hamper his career....*

Because of over-crowding, there is, says one student, "*a break in the student-teacher cycle*"; a. a result, he continues:

> *... students end up learning less ..... The colleges are receiving a poorer grade of student.*

In these remarks, teachers are absolved of blame; for example, one student insists:

> *This is by no means the teachers fault, as the student, teacher ratio is much to high.*

Rather, students blame educational policy-makers for over-crowding and its ill effects:

> *I know it is difficult for a teacher who has forty students to tutor each one separately, but this is the fault of the Nova Scotia education system. The classes are overcrowded , the teacher is overworked and underpaid, and that one to one contact is lost.*

For teachers too, apparently, beaurocracy is the villain in this piece, or so one student judges:

> *.... the teachers do not blame the students nor in fact the school teachers themselves. They blame the system.*

Nor is there any support among students for the politicians who would claim that 'optimal utilization of school resources' is cost-effectiveness that will save public money. One boy rejects that argument out of hand:

> *Its damn sure this measure didn't help the taxpayer much, but it sure cost the student. Where does the system see justification for cutting back on an overloaded staff ....*

TEACHERS' INCOMPETENCE

> *"As I think about it I 'laugh' because what comes to mind is who were my teachers at the time."*

Twenty respondents implicated teachers as contributors to students' language problems. The message from students is unmistakable:

where teachers are themselves incompetent in language or indifferent to students' language welfare, they are to blame for their students' deficiencies.

Furthermore, these students claim that bad teachers outnumbered good in their schools: in fact, they say that most of their teachers were unable to use or model appropriate language.

Who are the teachers of whom students complain? For the most part, they are the young, recent graduates of teacher-training programs. More to the point, they are the products of the same public education that these 1978 graduates criticize. Here is one student's observation:

> *... younger teachers whom I think also suffered the lack of writing essays thus both teachers and students suffer.*

To some students, these teachers are hardly more literate than those they have been hired to instruct:

> *.... the fault lies in the quality of the teaching staff in our school systems .... Many teachers in our high schools today are terrible in the fundamental and basic skills of reading and writing. Therefore how can people expect students to learn from the teachers when the teachers do not have the basic knowledge and skills.*

> *.... quite often, the teachers themselves cannot read or write properly. This presents a grim picture when students are being taught by incompenant teachers.*

That situation, concludes another student:

> *.... does not say much for the quality of younger teachers in N.S.*

Others charge that their teachers were cynical and that their cynicism affected students' language performance adversely:

> *I found through the thirteen years that I have attended school that nine out of ten teachers set very bad examples for their students. To many of the present tho, "do as little as possible" aspect of life. I always found it very hard to do good work for a teacher who did and cared little for his students, as long as he got his cheque. Maybe I'm being a little too hard on the system, but whenever I had a teacher that was hard on me I always seemed to do a hundred percent better work. It always felt very rewarding to know that the teacher cared and really would mark the paper that you spent hours doing.*

Two others allege that their teachers' cynicism affected their teaching:

> *Any English grammar or sentence structure the average high school teacher has received, was lost after he or she accepted his or her first paycheck.*

The second student's comment is less murky:

> *In my final year of high school I wrote one term paper but who's to say I wrote it correctly. As long as it was done the teacher was satisfied and so was I.*

Some of these students do report having encountered good teachers, teachers whose language proficiency was exemplary and whose commitment to language development inspired their students:

> *Personally I was extremely weak in reading and writing skills until I reached High School where I ran across an excellent English teacher. Since then I have improved considerably but I still could use about five years under her direction. Many people have not been quite so lucky as I. In fact, they have come across the types of teachers I had in previous years to High School.*

Throughout high school I was blessed with great English teachers. They taught me organization, interpretation, analization, a certain amount of word usage, along with the usual spelling, reading and writing skills. However, they couldn't expect to cram into three years all the basic skills other teachers had failed to teach me over the years. And believe me they failed!

However, those accounts suggest that an encounter with a teacher who cares about language excellence and who transmits that concern to students is rare. Students allege that it is a matter of luck to "*run across* " or "*come across*" such a teacher; one doesn't expect to be lucky enough to find one in each grade.

What one can safely assume, students say, is that those teachers whose ability makes them conspicuous are apt to be the older teachers, the products of an earlier, language-centered curriculum. These are the teachers who, according to one student:

.... were more aware of the basic reading writing and arithmetic skills and emphasized them more in the classroom.

They are peculiar, too, she adds, because:

.... they paid particular attention to the few students who were not acquiring these skills.

Another student has also landed mature teachers:

Sonething I have observed over the years; it that the older teachers stress more of the basics, then do the younger ones.

Here is a similar comment:

> *For the most part, the English courses I had were good, but I think most of this was decided by the teacher, and whether they were from the "old school" or "new school". The old teachers always dwelled more on the basics .....*

That a teacher can determine the orientation of the school curriculum is a point that the next student makes as well:

> *Classroom teachers have an enormous amount of input on the quality and quantity of school work they are to teach the students.*

And this student's comment suggests that the outlook of the teacher can influence the selection of performance - measuring instruments:

> *But I feel I was more fortunate than alot of other students. The older teachers did not want to drop the old system of Provincial essay exams and start the new [of multiple-choice tests] .....*
> *When I went into another grade and left one of these teachers behind I would keep wishing that I could have him or her again.*

USE OF NON-PRINT TEACHING MATERIALS

> *"It seems that there is too much emphasis on 'entertaining' the student with audio-visual techniques, etc."*

Nine students recognize that the increasing use of non-print instructional materials in school courses diverts them from reading and writing.

The materials that these students refer to include the pre-packaged learning systems as well as the more conventional hardware like tape recorders and film projectors. So popular have audio-visual materials become as teaching aids in schools that they have tended to supplant textbooks. Students now have less need to read than formerly, but also, it might be inferred from the following, they have less opportunity in class to do so:

> *My education, along with so many other's, is not adequately prepared for ... everything is done for us. Tape recorders, films and televisions have taken the place of books for the student. Children and teenagers are not persuaded to read and write so they don't do it. So very few are interested in reading a book when the exact same story is on television. In high school Shakespeare's plays are studied not through books so much, but tapes.*

The next student claims that other "aids", like the ready-made literary criticism in Coles Notes, eliminate the more demanding business of reading primary sources:

> *These .... books that summarize English literature and offer notes on major novels, essays, etc., have made it easy for the student to interpret litterature with little effort on his or her part.*

As self-teaching devices, programmed texts, packaged reading and writing practice kits, and the other skills-drills software that purports to simplify language development often fail their users:

> *The "lab" or "file" cards, (as they are commonly called) have all the information one needs for good writing skills. However, it does not help most students. This is due to the fact that these "file cards" become our teachers, most people cannot adapt to this.*

Despite their criticism, it is not the judicious use of such materials, nor the introduction of imaginative teaching techniques or "creative" programs that students take issue with. On the contrary, they concede that, if used sensibly, those devices can enhance learning:

> *.... these methods are good if handled properly.*

Rather, the problem, as students describe it, is a tendency among teachers to rely too heavily on gadgetry and undemanding assignments at the expense of disciplined language development:

> *.... as I entered junior high school, the school system was "progressing" and it seemed that the "old-fashioned" grammar was thrown out, only to be replaced by new methods of teaching, aimed at "entertaining" the student.*

Another student claims that the emphasis in allegedly 'creative' busywork can colour students' attitudes to language development:

> *.... we were placated with "fun" approaches to study. And this leaves us with the fixed idea that scrap-books are fun, interesting, and worth the time invested in them - term papers are not.*

That sort of 'do your own thing' creativity in the schools, says another:

> *... has taken away some of the emphasis on the basics.*

The next two students testify that, inasmuch as they disguise the rigour or the true rewards of language development and steal time from that task, the new teaching materials ultimately penalize students:

> *Films, tapes, magazines, newspapers, records, radio and T.V. have all made their way into the classroom as teaching aids. I can see where they could cause a decrease in reading and writing ability.*

> *.... because of the use of visual aids and the like, cannot possible hope to drastically improve your reading and writing skills. For example I was not introduced to a book report up until the last year of my formal education. And I was introduced to very few essay tests.*

HOME ENVIRONMENT

> *"Parent's are also depending more on the schools to teach the children and not helping them, themselves."*

Seven students called attention to the significance of the role that parents play in developing students' language ability. Several identified the benefits of their own parents' modelling and encouragement. For example, one girl says:

> *Perhaps I was one of the lucky ones. What I mean is, before ever reaching school my parents passed down to me a love of reading. Thus I had a head start. I looked to reading as a form of entertainment - not a chore.*

Another reports that but for her parents' example,

I would be uninterested
in all books.

A third comments wryly:

Fortunately, I have had few
problems with spelling and
grammar (possibly because
my father is an English teacher.)

Finally, one describes the fate of students who lack parental support:

They must tackle every obstacle by themselves
and probably most times be too frustrated and
never be taught the right skills in literature.

According to students, that is the lot of many of their fellows: students allege that parents too readily relinquish responsibility for language training to the schools. For example, from one student comes this accusation:

Parent's are also depending more
on the schools to teach the
children and not helping them,
themselves.

That practice, says another, just won't do, for:

.... reading is just not the responsi-
bility of schools. Reading should
also be followed up at home and
it is up to the parents to see
that the child reads.

A third writes himself into this syntactic tangle in his urgency to warn parents and teachers alike, that:

In order to reach the adequacy of reading and writing, parents along with teachers must be made to realize the importance of them.

And on that theme, another adds:

I'm also a firm believer in PTA meetings and parent days at schools, and that teachers and parents should correspond with each other as often as possible, to discuss the needs and the problems of the students.

THE MEDIA

> *"The media must take much of the blame for the 'illiteracy' of students today."*

Of the 265 freshmen questioned, only two cited television and other media as a cause of students' language problems, a curious reversal of the current trend.

Yet, though the criticism appears only twice in this survey, it is incisive and it echos the arguments of the mass of media-critics. For example, one boy concludes:

The media must be at fault as well. Why bother with reading when everything is coming to us in living colour in the comfort of our living rooms.

That television displaces private reading and reflection is not that medium's only fault. The abysmal quality of television programming, says the next student, tends to debase the language of the young. Nor do the print media escape his wrath:

> *The media must take much of the blame for the "illiteracy" of students today. Newspapers written in a simple, easy to read English at perhaps a grade 5 level. It is a scant vocabulary we pick up from this practice. Television, I feel, is at even lower level of learning. It is slowly erasing the minds of our young.*

CONCLUSIONS

From the evidence presented here, I submit two conclusions:

1. Students point out that their home environments; that is, the influence of their parents and of the media to which they are exposed in after-school hours, can impede language development. The significance of that statement cannot be overlooked; nevertheless, an uninspiring home environment is an impediment that is largely beyond the power of school authorities to remove. And it is school authorities that students implicate most often in their comments and for whom this report is intended. For the other, more numerous complaints that students lay, the other causes of language difficulties that they identify, are clearly the school's business. From the lack of instruction and practice to the reliance on non-print instructional materials, students'

criticisms are of school policies and practices; in fact, even the shortcomings for which students criticize themselves could be seen as reflections of indulgent school policies. The removal of those stumbling blocks in ways that students recommend entails changes that only school authorities can effect.

2. As significant as the information students present is the evidence of their intuitive good sense and courage: their observations about language development echo the most respected theorists; their recommendations are as sound as those of experienced practitioners; and their outspokenness is, in a way, more credible than that of the educational mavericks who now criticize from outside the system. These students are not stupid. That fact makes their inarticulateness the more moving.

RECOMMENDATIONS

What students disclose about public education and about themselves leads me to offer these two recommendations.

1. The most appropriate immediate response that education authorities can make to students' challenge is to invite further comment. Informal, indirect evaluation of the work of the school ought routinely to supplement formal assessments of student performance: we ought to ask the customer to evaluate the product more often

than we do. And while we're at it, we ought to poll the other users of education too: we ought to solicit candid comment from parents, teachers and other taxpayers.

2. If it is to be more than mere window-dressing, that review must be based on a willingness to change the public school curriculum; and if the student comment recorded in this study is any indication, the curriculum changes seen to be required will entail more than an appliqué of band-aid cures; they will necessitate sweeping reform: nothing less than the establishment of language training as the principal business of the curriculum!

Elevation of language training to preeminence in the curriculum will mandate distasteful and threatening changes in teacher qualifications, course content, teaching methods, and student evaluation. For example, because of the new emphasis on cross-curriculum language development, all teachers - not just teachers of English - must be more highly qualified in English, especially in writing, and teacher certification must be based largely on that qualification rather than on an accumulation of academic credits. If courses are to be more language-oriented, teachers and students must be relieved of the need to "cover" prescribed content; teaching loads must be reduced to allow teachers to down play the lecture method in favour of informal

approaches that encourage exploratory reading in the classroom, that give time for discussion among students, and that make regular writing practice possible. If the curriculum is to be less oriented toward the passive assimilation of facts, essay and oral examinations must predominate. Finally, a commitment to language training will presume that education authorities have the candour to advertise that their efforts will be hampered, if not nullified, if parents do not foster language growth at home.

Utopian? Impossible? I don't think so, though the curriculum's deemphasis of language training has been publicly condemned countless times (though rarely from within the walls) - with little noticeable effect.

But the curriculum will not be changed in these ways until we accept that language development is inseparable from intellectual growth (Someone has said that, "language is not only the vehicle of thought; it is also the driver".); until we concede that it ought to be the key to social and occupational progress, that as John Adams wrote 200 years ago, "eloquence will become the instrument for recommending men to their fellow citizens and the principal means of advancement through the various ranks and offices of society."; until we begin to perceive of language development as the mainstream of education rather than as its backwater.

AFTERWORD

Lest we at the college level be tempted to strike the usual postures of righteous indignation at the inadequacies of the public school that its graduates expose here, we would do well to remember that those same inadequacies characterize post-secondary education as well.

Students predict that their language incompetence will hinder them in college courses and ultimately deter them from earning a college degree. Unfortunately, their apprehension reflects more of the myth than the reality of college-level language standards: at college no less than in public school, language shortcomings are glossed over and language proficiency subordinated to other skills or to the "ideas" in a piece of writing. Therefore, in some courses at least, students' fears about the consequences of their language difficulties are quickly allayed; in others, though their inability may reduce their grade, it rarely prevents them from earning a pass.

College administrators, apprehensive that to insist on language proficiency would spell their institution's economic decline in a time of dwindling enrollments or claiming that it would violate the spirit of democratic, community education, remain silent and inert or where they respond, do so by financing wholly inadequate auxiliary remediation.

Though colleges are as guilty as are public schools of failing to require and maintain a standard of language excellence, colleges cannot

be blamed for rejecting formal language training as their proper responsibility. College-level remediation cannot suffice: it comes too late and because it must run concurrently with academic courses, it is too little.

That is a valid defense; yet, colleges rarely exercise it; colleges rarely publicize their inability to compensate for the failure of the public schools to prepare students in language. Our silence on that point is our greatest fault. Were we to reiterate and publicize the protests of students like those polled in this survey, the effort would be of far greater service to our students than any remediation we ourselves could launch.

Appendix A - Comparison of Entrance Test Scores and Response to Test Question (Self-Evaluation).

Explanation

In drawing these comparisons, I will refer to the three principal scores generated by the entrance test: first, an assessment of Reading Comprehension, as it was reflected in students' restatement of the main ideas of a test passage; second, a score for Topic Development, the most important of five criteria applied to students' essays; and finally, an aggregate or overall test score, derived by weighting the combined Reading Comprehension and Topic Development scores.

All three scores are reported as LOW, MID-RANGE, and HIGH. Furthermore, the overall test score became the basis for a prediction about the degree of difficulty that a student might be expected to encounter with college-level reading and writing assignments. For example, a HIGH overall test score was taken to mean that the student so assessed could be expected to experience little or no difficulty; a MID-RANGE score that he would be apt to experience moderate difficulty; and a LOW score that he was predicted to have serious difficulty with college-level coursework. (Note that these predictions are based on overall test scores only.)

In the tables below, Group 1 refers to the 141 students who felt that they were not adequately prepared for college-level reading and writing assignments; Group 2 consists of the 69 students who rated themselves as prepared for college-level assignments; and Group 3 includes the 55 students who failed to answer the test question as directed.

TABLE 1. READING COMPREHENSION SCORES

	LOW	MID-RANGE	HIGH
GROUP 1	28.3%	67.3%	4.2%
GROUP 2	36.2%	62.3%	1.4%
GROUP 3	45.5%	50.9%	3.6%

TABLE 2. TOPIC DEVELOPMENT SCORES

	LOW	MID-RANGE	HIGH
GROUP 1	73.7%	21.2%	4.9%
GROUP 2	69.5%	24.6%	5.7%
GROUP 3	80.0%	18.1%	1.8%

COMMENTS:

1. The staggering proportion of LOW Topic Development scores in all three groups suggests that students' most serious shortcoming is

their inability to write coherently.

2. The proportion of LOW Reading Comprehension and Topic Development scores is somewhat greater in Group 3, a finding that may help explain why these students did not answer the test question as directed; i.e., because they misinterpreted it or because they, more even than students in Groups 1 and 2, were incapable of the logical topic development that it demanded.

TABLE 3. OVERALL TEST SCORES

	LOW (Predicted to have serious difficulty)	MID-RANGE Predicted to have moderate difficulty)	HIGH Predicted to have little or no difficulty)
Group 1	49.6%	39.7%	10.6%
Group 2	53.6%	37.6%	8.1%
Group 3	52.7%	41.8%	5.4%

COMMENTS:

1. Group 1's low self-rating is realistic, since the overwhelming majority of students in that group were predicted to encounter moderate or serious difficulty with college reading and writing assignments.

2. On the other hand, Group 2's self-assessments are over-confident, since only 8.1% of these students were predicted to encounter little or no difficulty with college coursework.

Appendix B - Sex Distribution.

	MALE	FEMALE
GROUP 1 (141 students)	46.1%	53.9%
GROUP 2 (69 students)	47.8%	52.1%
GROUP 3 (55 students)	58.2%	41.8%
TOTAL POPULATION (265 students)	49.0%	50.9%

COMMENTS:

1. It is noteworthy that in all but one instance females outnumber males. In the single exception; that is, among students who failed to answer the question as directed, males predominate.

Appendix C - Additional Student Comments About Language Problems and Contributing Factors.

More About Language Problems

The standard of education has decreased so much that although there are less of us illiterate, there are more of us ignorant.

I take pride in being well-read and written.

I have poor sentence structure, a spelling problem and although I am able to do public speaking, I don't have the ability to read aloud in front of people.

The skills of writing and reading which are the most important I do not think I've been prepared properly.

My spelling is only adequet.

I know of people myself who could barely read while in grade twelve. These people could not have gotten the necessary reading skills while in school.

I feel that after thirteen years of school my hand writing should be much more advanced that it is now. I think hand writing is an essential skill which any high school graduate should be able to master. Using myself as an example I feel the basics of reading and writing our lacking in school systems leaving graduates unprepared for the society they are about to enter.

I am basically, a lousy speller and I know it.

At times I have problems understanding what I read and trying to put things in my own words. These things must be taught at an early age.

I have had many opportunities to meet and talk with people both educated and uneducated. Included in these were college proffessors who on different ocasions have indicated their disapointment with students due to their inability to cope with the work set before them.

Communication is the big point being put across (in the test passage) because with out this you wouldn't be able to read or write, this also includes the deaf or blind. When, I refer to the deaf, I mean they can speak with their sign language. When I refer to the blind they can read and write with brail and communicate with their tongue.

Without communication we would have no economy. No bargaining, trading, business talks, or any kind of things would go on if we didn't have all types of communication in our economy.

Many people are content with the extent of development that they have achieved in high school in these respects and this is definately their privalege. Personally with the reading and writing skills I've developed through high school alone I am not equiped to face a world where to read and write is the key to all doors.

.... the students of today will be the rulers of the world tomorrow. If this decline in reading & writing skills keep up, the world may be in a state of total illiteracy. The questions are: who will teach then? Who is to blame?

Since I am lacking in higher skills of reading and writing, it makes it very hard for me in different fields of society.

I have been told though by many people, especially teachers, that reading and writing skills in highschool and college students are poor.

I don't believe that the education I recieved in high school, had prepared me to enter a college program. It has been my own experience that after spending two years on my own, I did not have the basic necessary skills to perform everyday duties which were required of me. I believe because of my high school education I am limiting myself of a great number of professions because of the lack of these necessary skills.

I believe myself that I did not have enough education in English. I don't mean that I couldn't hold a conversation with someone but there is just so much to be learned about the English language and I feel that high schools don't teach enough BASICS.

It is very sad to see the grammatical ability of some students. Most students entering higher places of learning have very little reading or writing ability.

I think that after finishing high school, my vocabulary and to write good constructed sentences should be better. Teachers did not take enough time in teaching vocabulary.

In my own case, I don't think the schools have taught me to remember much of what I've learned so far which, in a sense, is not all that much considering what there is in this world to be learned.

I have just graduated from grade twelve and I must admit that English grammar had to be taught almost from scratch. I've heard the teacher say more than once that we are on the same level of grammar as some of the grade tens.

During my own years of schooling I have not learned how to read and write in a manner that I can write about anything that I have read. Grade nine was the only year they taught communication skills in junior high.

High school was the start for learning how to read passages and try to summarize them. Grade twelve is where I learned the most in that field.

I feel that from my high school education I can read adequately but my writing skills could be improved.

It is obvious to me that my education has not adequately prepared me for university and beyond. Many other students have the same problem. We have fairly good backgrounds in reading and writing, but we still have problems with basic grammar and spelling. Too often have I heard: "I seen that show before." or something similar, and I know for a fact that many students need more work in spelling.

How does this relate to me? Well all through school, English has been my weakest subject. In the area of reading, I am about average, as I am for writing, but in the area of spelling I am below average. I am not sure of the reason why I am weak in spelling. It may be my own fault-or it could be our education system.

I feel I wouldn't be able to write college essays and term papers properly.

Many young people are being continually turned down because they are just not up to the standards required of them for a peculiar job in which they have trained. I know of a situation in which a girl had taken a course for secretarial work but was begin continually turned down because she just did not have the proper education in the writing skills required for the job ..... This girl is now working in a department store with no hope for a future in the job she has trained for because of her poor writing skills.

When a college student comes out of college the still can't fill out an application properly. There comprehension and, spelling leave a large amount to be desired. This defect can't be the complete fault of the student.

Through my experience through high school I realized just how much I didn't know about reading and writing.

Penmanship and spelling have lost their meaning as no strong emphasis is placed on them. My education in both areas, is sketchy to say the least.

I have seen students in grade 12 who are supposed to be graduating and going to college or starting a new phase of their lives who can't write a sentence properly.

I feel the reading has helped me alot and could use some improvements but The writing lacks in style, meaning and composition with many high school students.

Because of this I have poor sentence structure, a spelling problem and although I am able to do public speaking, I don't have the ability to read aloud in front of people.

That would have to be one of my biggest downfalls - a lack of knowledge in relation to grammar as well as punctuation. It is often difficult to write in a cohesive and coherent manner when I cannot connect my thoughts and ideas properly.

The thought about going to university is scary enough, but when you don't know how to write a real essay and get the full meaning, then you are in trouble.

There are many people I know who do not know the proper format of an essay or a certain kind of poetry.

One thing which has stuck in my mind for some time, is that I've been told by my high school english teachers that my ideas are good and that they show that I'm thinking but that my formulation of my ideas is poor. Perhaps you can see this for yourself just through the composition of this essay.

Also in writing essays and other such articles my field of expression is limited due to the fact that my field in language skills is limited.

We tend to write, not really making use of a full vocabulary or originality.

Graduates from High School have the feeling that something is missing, they graduate all right but they still have trouble doing a simple book report or Term paper without having to have it checked over by someone who knows how to write and place good punctuation.

The level of education I have received upon finishing grade twelve is not sufficient enough to allow me to enter certain businesses and not have me completely lost.

Our future as employees will be terrible if we are afraid to write because of our ignorance of our language.

If a high school graduate leave school planning on taking up a trade, I believe his reading and writing skills are sufficient. On the other hand the students going to college, I feel, are a little to slack in their skills. For myself I would agree with the ladder .....

More About Lack Of Instruction and Practice

Personally I feel that schools should not stop teaching the basics of reading and writing. They teach it very well in the lower grades and then toss it aside until grade twelve when they give you a refresher course. Then everyone screams that your practically illiterate.

If you were to take an average high school class and examine their reading, and writing abilities, they probably would not be prepared for the society they live in. Not all the students can communicate on paper. They seem to have difficulty in putting their point across. This is basically due to the fact that they have not had proper education in reading and writing.

I have noticed that when you reach high school writing, and reading are not a basic requirement to get through. Most of the writing which is done is not your own. There is not much time spent on reading. These are not really expected of you at that point.

The English courses offered in the schools does not require a lot of writing. When you get to the high school level there is less. .... The reading and writing you do in school does not include enough grammar in it.

Last year my grade twelve academic english teacher was required to spend a month teaching basic grammar before continuing with the grade twelve program because seventy-five percent of the class were not taught basic grammar in elementary school.

If students donot know the basics I ask; how are they expected to learn the more complicated parts of their language?

I believe with incidents like that which happened to me in grade twelve occur, it is time for a revision of the language arts aspect of the education system, time to get back to the basics.

Up until the time I reached grade six, much emphasis was placed on reading, writing, and grammer. After this time I transferred to a much larger public school where I found I no longer received lessons in spelling or grammer but was required to increase my vocabulary on my own and it seemed the teachers assumed I know all there was to know about the rules and regulations governing grammer.

When it came time for assignment to be handed in and after the papers were past back the teachers would point out the most common grammer errors but no extensive lessons in grammer were taught, thus, I continued to make the same mistakes year after year.

I also remember teachers saying, "If it sounds good and pleasing to the ear, it is probably gramaticaly correct".

This would have been a bit of good advice if I was accustom to reading alot and would know from experience if what I wrote sounded correct, but since I was only encouraged to do extra reading and only required to read one novel per semester I found myself in a poor state. I managed to pass consecutively year after year but my reading and writing skills didn't show a great deal of improvement.

One area I can say affected me a great deal was public speaking. In the younger grades children should have to get up in front of the classroom at least three times a year. Through special things like "show and tell" or reading the rest of the students a story, they can avoid ever developing a fear of being in front of people talking. Until my last year of high school I was terrified to do anything in front of others, and it was only through a very close friend that I got over it and even became co-head of a club in the school.

In the junior high school years students are better able to learn the basics of reading and writing. At this time students should be taught to interpret skillfully what they read, and also taught to translate and write coherently what they have read. In my junior high years this was not so. I was taught only to read, I was not taught to understand what I was reading.

It seems during my high school year teachers tended not to spend time on grammar but on reading novels, plays, poetry, etc. Students would be required to write essays and term papers that stated their individual views; once corrected and mistakes found, students were never shown the proper usage of words or punctuation.

Throughout school we have been taught novels, short stories and plays and we have improved our reading skills through this but not our own writing skills. We have neglected the verbs, nouns and adverbs through this our own writing skills have been hurt.

If the student depends entirly upon what he learns in school, he could be lost.

Most of the education you achieve is forgotten, and it hard to stay at the same peak or high level of education.

During my younger years in school it seem's that the basics of English were never stressed that hard. In my Junior High days, I had a teacher, who when she gave a English test, would also just about give us the answers to it. I thanked her then for it but do I thank her now? No.

As I went from one grade to another I felt that each teacher was only preparing me enough, that is teaching me enough reading and writing so that I could write each test. These tests were short answer tests, never essays. I feel that I have not been trained well enough in the field of grammar. Grammar is one of the most important steps on the way to reading and writing. All through elementary and junior high I received this type of training, chapter to chapter type thing. When I would go home I could study the night before for a test and make an excellent mark. Therefore I wasn't reading enough.

.... during our education we have only dealt with the english language up to a junior High level and then from their on we have dealt with Shakespeare and other well known poets etc but this does not help us to become more skillful in our English skills.

From my own experience in high school (or, in fact, in any level), I have found that students know a good deal (or at least have a basic knowledge of) English literature such as the works of Shakespeare or Keats instead of English grammer (reading, writing etc.)

.... more emphasis should be placed on grammer and writing and let the high institutions such as colleges and universities to teach people the finer arts.

I have learned alot about Shakespeare's works, which I do appreciate but I don't honestly think his plays are going to help me when I enter the world as a member of the working class. I feel that more emphasis should be on the reading and writings of modern people, our people. We should be learning about reporting, counselling, writing, etc.

I found that in the regular English class, we weren't taught the basics of reading and writing. so I looked for courses that would teach me this.

.... now, schools have gradually slipped away from the basics.

.... high school english courses are not enough grammer oriented. I feel that in my three years of high school combined I spent only about 1/3 the time on grammer that I did in grade nine alone.

Grammar is a part of an English course, a very little part in our school system If we want to be better readers and writers, grammar will have to play a bigger part in our English course. If we had to read a paragraph and pick out words not belonging in it, or fill in the apostrophes, commas and periods very few of us would do it correctly because we haven't had enough experience in doing so.

When I began high school it seemed to me that very little importance was placed on grammar. I think that the English system should consist mainly of grammar and of analyzing written works such as poems and short stories. If this was done I'm sure that a high school graduate would be able to read and write better.

These things must be taught at an early age. I think if more stress was placed on writing and understanding what I read instead of doing many novels, the problem may be be solved.

... when a child enters into elementary school and begins to learn how to read and write that more emphasis should be placed in these areas instead of on history or geography and maybe in the next decade we will have better writers and better readers.

.... there was a noticable decrease in the amount of grammar I was taught as I went up through the grades. This I feel was damaging to my vocabulary and writing ability.

... in high schools, teachers do not spend enough time on the skills of reading and perhaps a few ideas on comprehension. But really it should be started at the junior high level where it would be more help for the future.

In High School, these skills are often neglected or taken for granted. Too few teachers are willing to take the time to learn students the proper way to write.

During the elementary school years the level of reading and writing skills continues to rise, but by the time the student reaches grade 9 he doesn't learn any more skills. In high school the skills which he has learnt are strengthened but not to a great extent and he doesn't seem to learn any more. Also during High School the student's grammar knowledge is not broadened it is simply forgotten.

In lower grades everyone read but as we got higher up only those who were excellent readers read while the rest sat and listened. Writing was something else. I never wrote an essay until grade eight which is far to late. Then when one wrote essays for different subjects there was always rule changes and added things which we hadn't heard of before yet we were expected to know.

It would be easy for high schools to say that students receive enough grammer in elementary and junior high and the students only require to develop the art of reading. In my high school at least a fair amount of time was spent on English grammer although I really don't think it was enough.

Relating with my own experience in school years I agree with this passage. Only in the earlier grades we worked with grammer. I feel our reading and writing ability begin with our knowledge of proper grammer. There should be arranged classes of reading and writing in all grades. A system of testing the students regularly on their reading and writing ability, would I feel eventually raise our level to read and write.

Although there has been little English grammar since grade nine the reading and writing in high school has compensated a bit for it. English grammar should be taught in high school also as there are many people who lack the ability to read and interpret a sentence, quote, essay, etc.

Teachers did not take enough time in teaching vocabulary. Up until grade nine I always had spelling tests in school. After grade nine there were very few times that I was taught the basic skills of English.

To be frank I feel that their is no limit in one's knowledge of this field. Its one that was stressed eight yr's ago in my Jr. high yr's, and then it was no more.

.... until grade 12, I'd never really been taught reading and writing skills in great detail.

When it comes to reading, teachers in the lower grades encourage most student to reading, but as they progress up the grades teachers encourage only the good, faster or speedy readers to read out loud. While other students are left in a cloud of dust. This is how its been through my schooling. In high school it is the exact same way, then they are pushed into go college without knowing how to read and, write, then they themselves feel the pressure.

... schools of today don't teach you to read, write, or be able to understand things you read. Schools don't teach the basics like they used to years before.

When you enter high school today, if you don't have these skills then too bad. You have to either do as well as you can without them or try to obtain them on your own.

Too often the "a, b, c's" of learning were not stressed enough in our earlier years. This is the key needed to unlock our minds.

In my high school it was just my graduate year that English grammar and spelling was pushed upon me, we had a little of this in grade school but not near enough. This is to late; much to late in my education to receive this. It must start back in grade school; I wouldn't like grammar etc but it still must be taught untill the student's become proficient with it's usage.

The era gone by when our parents were children had a better and more adept educational system than what is present today. They were taught reading, writing and arithmetic, the basics, and they were taught them well. The methods of coarse were different being more strict and demanding for everyone, but this seemed to help in producing a more aware child.

Only in the general english courses do the students learn reading and writing skills, grammar and basic skills. The academic courses deal with literature - Shakespeare is the main subject - very rarely is poetry ever touched - grammar never. I may be able to quote lines from Shakespeare but I cannot analyze a sentence nor do I think my vocabulary is very broad.

During my high school experience there was too much time spent on literature and not enough spent on the basics. If they could find a way to do most of the work in the classroon, the student would probably develope better. Most of the English work is done at home and more than half is probably copies from someone else.

Not enough time has been spent in school on writing and reading skills in nearly all the english courses I have received. To much time was spent on reading novels, plays, short stories etc and what is the use of reading and answering questions when you can not write properly. More reading and especially writing skills are needed to be available to you during your years of education.

I know myself of a lot of people who wish now that when they were first learning to write that their teachers would have stressed writing more and spend more time developing a writing skill.

... during my high school years reading and writing were looked on too lightly. We skimmed the top briefly and even what we did do was rather simple with the odd exception.

There is not enough English Grammer or spelling taught in schools today.

My own personal opinion is that the writing part was not stressed as much as it should have been, sentence structure is not emphasised enough.

Students are not getting these reading and writing skills to the level which society demands. It is not being taught to these levels in the schools. Of course all students can read and write but the level and acquracy of this is what is missing. Things like book reports and essays are good for the writing aspect. These things could even help reading habits.

.... These basic reading and writing skills are not considered to be essential by the teachers.

.... All the basic skills other teachers had failed to teach me over the years. And believe me they failed! I didn't learned grammar, phonetics, and was rarely given the chance to read aloud.

The education that I had received has prepared me for a much lower standard of society than that which I'd like to believe I have achieved by graduating.

Unfortunately, maximum importance is not being placed on these skills and therefore the student will lack.

I feel that in some of the schools many students lack the basic skills of reading and writing. This should be taught at an early age and then later on teach the students other ways to use his skills.

I feel that there should be more stress on writing and structure of sentences, and paragraphs than there has been before. We should be taught, starting in the very early grades, the basics of english literature and reading. It is essential to start from the basics and this is what I feel we, the students, know so little about.

I feel that there should be more stress placed on the skill of reading and writing from the very beginning back in elementary. I'myself have not received enough of these skills in the past. I am hoping that entering college will help me accomplish these skills.

The only suggestions I could make to remedy this problem are: assign more writing to students, especially those in lower grades; teach more grammar; try to increase the amount of material being taught to students in lower grades, because the workload is too light, especially in elementary school.

If I can't read or write it is really my fault. At the age of five or six do I make the real decision to learn these new skills or does the teacher do this for me. It all begins in your first few years of school. If anything is wrong, its the education system that works against itself.

I do believe that, there should be more emphasis placed on reading, writing, and especially communication in todays schools. Hpwever, I think that this type of teaching should begin right back in the elementary grades, where it would bave the greatest influence on the child.

The group (creative writing club) suffered from a lack of exposure to any great variety of writers (surely this shouldn't wait until college) and, more importantly, from any practice at writing in school-creatively, I mean.

.... not enough stress put on grammar. There is alot of reading, but not so much in the training of writing.

Myself, I do try and read so as to have a broader scope of ideas from which I can draw my opinions. But I don't really feel that my education has encouraged this as it should.

Grammar was never taught enough during the years of our school days because we still have difficulty reading and writing the English language.

In my point of view I feel that as far as literature is concerned that I have been instructed in it but not as thoroughly as I would have liked to be. I feel that there are many aspects of literature that I am still not sure of ....
I also feel that if we are not taught enough literature in high school that is is no fault of our own. The Education System should stress this aspect of learning alot stronger than it apparently does.

I feel more grammar and essay writing is necessary in the lower grades this would help improve the quality of our literary education. I know from my own experience that I dodn't receive proper training in the field of grammer and literature.

Teachers in primary and secondary schools should stress more, the reading and writing skills of their students. They should be able to read something, and tell what it means in their own words and be able to express themselves to other people so that they too will be understood.

... too much emphasis is placed on relatively unimportant material. The time could be better spent teaching students the basics.

I believe the reason this is happening is because the world has changed so much in a short time. We teach our students new facts and forget the basics that we all take for granted.

.... I believe that my grammar was much better in grade nine then it is now. Since I entered high school I have received very little education in grammar.

.... The only way to change this is to alter our emphasis. In my own opinion reading and writing should be the most important part of a students education. When we have mastered the basics we may go on to more advanced areas of learning.

In the early grades, I was taught how to form sentences, paragraphs, and short essays. I was encouraged to do creative writing, i.e. poetry and short stories. I learned to read and write. I was taught rules to write correctly.

Upon entering junior high school, I was no longer encouraged to write as I pleased. I was taught how to take sentences apart, instead of how to put them together, what the words of a sentence are called, instead of what they mean. Spelling was emphasized. It became more important to spell a word correctly than to use it correctly. I was made to read books - not that I minded reading, I rather enjoyed it - and then to write about them, being careful not to use words from the books without saying so. Writing became a chore. I was more concerned with the rules than the ideas I wished to express.

Everything changes once more in high school. Spelling was ignored, personal writing was ignored, and oral reading was ignored. Dictation was important, and questions were not allowed. Shakespeare and modern poetry became important, as well as term papers. But the rules of sentence and paragraph structure were not renewed. They had been dormant for several years, (and only fragments of them at that) for a child's mind has no use for rules.

Through my school years, elementary up to high school, the English courses which I have taken didn't stress language usage. We were taught alot of spelling and grammar but thats where it ended, just like learning words but not putting them into sentences.

It is also true that what you do not use, you loose. If many people don't have a chance to use their literary skills they will loose their ability to do so.

... I still find it difficult to express myself on paper. Business letters are a nightmare! We were only taught how to write them in Grade twelve, and the few we did were not enough to prepare us for writing real ones. It is unfortunate that there doesn't seem to be enough time in English classes to cover enough work.

... Instructors rush through such boring lessons as grammer and phonetics saying, you'll learn it all in junior high. But come junior high, you'll learn it in high school. By this time the number of students without a basic understanding of their own language beyond simple conversation is appalling.

Everyone has seen the same episode in class where everybody sweats it out, while a slow reader stumbles throug a passage he has to read. It happens in high school, and it happens too often. The student involved feels insulted by the class and the teacher, and if he does anything about it, it will probably be trying to read as little as possible from then on. One more possible college student bites the dust.

Students do not get enough opportunities to practice whatever writing skills they may have. There are few teachers who give assignments in the younger grades or give any type of creative writing. The more one practices at something, the better one gets. By the time students reach the higher grades, they are afraid to write assignments.

He (the average student) has writen too many short answer, objective questions which appear on high school tests and exams.

The other reason for our failure to have adequate language abilities is the school system. Reading and writing are definitely not stressed enough. In my years of schooling I did very little reading at all except for the occasional novel. I cannot give you my experiences on this subject from the point of view of the college graduate but from what I heard it seems that the colleges fail to stress these skills also.

I have realized for the last three years, especially since the return of examinations, that unit testing has spoiled most students. "Short answer" and "True or False" tests have limited the students ability to write especially to get a point across.

I realized this problem several years ago when I noticed people reading and writing at a grade 6 or 7 level when attending grade 10, 11, etc. I know right now if half the new student population was asked to write a friendly business letter applying for a job, they just couldn't do it.

In my own school years from grades three to nine, grammar and structure of sentences were drilled into each pupil. although one might not notice from reading this essay. In high school, grammar was dropped for a higher, and more intellectual part of writing ... "style". No one was ready or even prepared for this but, as always, the show must go on, and therefore we were all pushed ahead into more unknowns without a good background.

You go from writing short stories which everyone enjoyed writing, to writing dull history reports. After a few years of this the student starts to lose his imagination; everything becomes the same. Before long the student loses interest in school because its the same old thing everyday. The student does not get a chance to express his imagination, or to develop his writing skills. The only thing he uses his imagination for is how to get out of doing homework or to pass a test without studying. It may not be the same in all schools but it was in my school.

In elementary and junior high, myself as well as all other students my age were taught at first: letters, the sounds of letters, words, how to compose sentences, the correct grammar and finally small compositions and rough essays. In the high school years, the amount of time spent on the actual learning of the reading and writing skills was cut very short.

Although reading and writing was carried on in other academic courses such as history or biology, the true lessons of reading and writing were not emphasized really enough.

My education, along with so many other's, is not adequately prepared for. In elementary we are taught the basics of reading and writing but after this everything is done for us. .... Very few essays are done in school and compositions stop in the seventh grade if they were started at all. Everyone is taught to read words but not to comprehend them. Grammar is hardly touched.

The basics skills of reading and writing have long been neglected. It would also seem that they are no longer important. How wrong!

The last years of my schooling as far as I'm concerned English was non existing what they taught us and what we need in society were to totally different things.

This is where most of my problems extend from. I feel that I have not received and adequate amount of teaching in certain areas of English, such as composition.

They cannot be expected to do these things right if they are not given a solid background or are not taught the right things.

.... we didn't have the opportunity to do enough writing. We did more writing in jr. high than in high school. In my opinion, a lot more writing should be done in high school.

If more time was put in to teaching and practising these skills then students today would be better off ...

I believe some areas of my life education have help me for example education have help me to learn more about the society I live in today and of the past but has not learned me nothing in writing an essay.

... Young people are definitely not getting the proper education required of them for the certain jobs which they are applying themselves for.

I feel that the education I have received has prepared me so far in society, but I have not been faced with a situation where reading and writing skills were required to a great content. Perhaps if I were faced with such a situation, for example, a job that required such skills as necessities to succeed, then probably I would really find out if the education I have obtained has prepared me ...

The grade school that I attended was, in my opinion, nothing more than a day care center for children. I feel that the years spent from grade one to grade seven were wasted. Sure I learned how to read and write a little, but the point is we had too much spare time that was wasted.

It is bad to go to school for seven years with hardly no home work at all, and having an easy time; then all of a sudden your in a new school (junior high) piled with work ....

Some doctors say this sudden pressure on the students is what may not only cause them to go astray, but is bad on them in a medical sense.

.... There should be a set curriculum for all elementary schools to follow. Therefore, every child has an equal change to obtain a good education.

More About Automatic Promotion

They are getting passes in the courses they take and are given graduation diplomas so it can't be completely their own fault. If they are getting passes the teachers must consider the work to be good enough, either that or they are just there for the money and don't care what type of work is being handed in.

These students are feeling pressure because a teacher was to busy to recognize a reading problem and just kept pushing him or her from grade to grade. This is the major problem I believe in our school system teachers arent taking the time with students, so now we have a problem.

High schools today have eased up considerably from previous years. A high school diploma isn't worth as much today as it use to be.

In high schools I feel too much time is wasted on reading not on the understanding of what a student has read. Some teachers just don't take the time to care if you understand or not, they're just to eager to finish a book or a chapter and just keep forging ahead. I feel this shows on a student. I know myself that there were many times when the teacher or class would be reading something and I just wouldn't comprehend. Ask the teacher? "Well ..., we'll go back to that later". Did they ever? NO. I found with writing teachers are a little strict on your punctuation and your ability to attract attention to your paper. But do they actually help to improve such skills? Not likely.

Many teachers complain that the students can't read or write properly. If this is the case it isn't the students' fault. The teachers in the lower grades should be told not to let the student go on if they can't keep up with the rest of the class.

It is mostly the fault of the school system and the teachers of the lower grades that allows students when they reach a higher level of learning.

With the great increase in attendance at college during the past ten years or so, it seems the college degrees are not worth so much. This cannot be used as an excuse to lower standards of english even if grammar is old-fashioned. To make that degree worth more, more learning must be achieved to yield a better output.

I believe the problem that teachers have with their student's not being able to read and write is because the standard's of education are much lower than they used to be.

Most people are so set on staying at the top that even the teachers try to keep you up there, meanwhile they are overlooking an important part of everyday life reading and writing. Basic English is by far the hardest of all English courses and yet its the students with the low marks and poor English who take the course. In the end these people are the lucky ones who will wind up with a reasonably good job with a sixty average and yet you with an 80 average still can't get a good job because you need a shoulder to lean on when it comes to writing and reading.

This point alor I think of pushing kids on drowns todays educational system. The students entering into todays society have probably missed many important points along their educational road.

I realize that a lot of people are graduating with the reading and writing abilities of what might be expected of a junior high student. As I think back on my graduating class, I would say that seventy percent had the literary skills that are expected of them. This is only my opinion and I could be wrong, but I believe the both schools that I went through during my lifetime were exceptional. .... I'm no expert, and I'm not claiming I know all the answers to this complex problem, but like I mentioned before, if there was a little more discipline in schools, and students weren't "pushed" through school, I think students would graduate a little bit more educated.

The work and information is here but not enough is expected from us. I know I've only studied what I had to study and made good marks.

In most cases, I feel that this problem can't be blamed on the teachers but on the "system" (that insists on pushing kids ahead from a very early age when they really don't have the capability to read or write at their own level, let alone a higher one).

.... I think that in many of the cases students that beat the system are just let through.

Kids are out of school more than they are in..... Life for the high school student should not be all fun and games. If high school teachers would tighten up, make use of free time, make teaching a fulltime job, it would make life a whole lot easier for those starting off at college.

More About Students' Personal Shortcomings

People just go to school to say they went and not to learn at all. Some people just think of education as something to pass the time, but its not.

We may be influenced in primary years but by the time we reach high school we should be able to take it upon ourselves to further our skills in reading & writing if we feel we need it. But as we know very few people do this, but the few that do should feel free to ask their teachers for any counselling they may require. If we ask we are sure to receive help but if we don't the teacher may feel we know as much as we possible should.

Since my graduation in June, I have tried to improve my education. I have read books on how to read faster, how to write with style, and how to write clearly. I feel I have benefitted more from one summer of personal instruction than from 13 years in school.

Although I've always had a basic knowledge and have always read, in fact almost as soon as I could hold a book, magazine, candy wrapper or whatever else I could lay my sticky fingers an, my last school year brought everything into a clearer focus. I think this requires action on bath teacher and student; maybe my grade 12 teacher outshone all the others or maybe I just took a greater interest.

Anything I read must have meaning. I find it difficult to pick up a novel at a bookstore and reading it unless I have to. I'd like to do more general reading, which I feel is a must.

In order for a student graduating from high school now to be well educated in this respect he would have to either take an extra English course, (maybe Canadian literature) and/or do a lot of reading and writing as a hobby. I have done neither.

I tried to slip through school, if I tried harder maybe would have been prepared. It was once said "education is what still remember after you left school."

As for today's students, if we want to achieve our goal bad enough we will have to work harder for it. We will not be the first handicapped people to obtain goals other people believed to be beyond our reach.

I don't really believe that our basic skills are any worse. It is just that the way we have been taught, we have become lazy in our ways, and hence, skip a comma here and there begin our sentences with and and because. But we do know better when we stop and think.

My reading skills are not the best but I cannot blame the system because I failed to read more on my own time. However, if people take the time to read and possibly write in their spare time then they will be using what they learned beneficially.

Today's students are apathetic where their studies are involved. When one considers that for most English courses the pass is fifty percent and a mark of sixty percent will be accepted by a college it is no wonder students are content to "get by" with the least possible effort.

I feel that if the level of the high school graduate is to be upgraded it must be with the students' respect for learning and not with the present system of teaching.

A majority of the student body feel that doing the minimum amount of work is sufficient, thus this leads to a deterioration of their abilities. Then again, there is the student who is constantly doing some form of self-betterment by reading and writing on his own, thus he can operate more efficiently in the classroom because he has shown to himself a desire to learn; in other words, many people suffer from the illness known as "lack of desire"

The fact that while in school most students don't show the initiative to better their reading and writing abilities is the major problem. They don't take their schooling serious enough and fail to realize this until it is too late and they are forced to face the world unprepared.

I feel that most people who read and write good are the people who learn faster at any early age. Some people learn fast and others learn slow and that can't be helped but the slower people should get a fair chance to learn how to read and write properly. It is totally up to the person if he wants to learn and if he doesn't then he probably won't succeed in this world.

I cannot blame everything on the teacher or the system because to a certain extent learning to read and to write is up to the person. One must want to learn and show interest in reading and writing.

The preparation is available, but the student must be interested and determined if such things don't come easily. Whether or not a student can succeed in our world is a decision he must make on his own. .... a student can become very skillful. He may have to inquire about language skills in depth. But the answers are there if a student has enough interest.

I believe that not only college students, but high school students as well, should push themselves into learning as much as they can, while in a school system.

More About Overcrowding

Anyway the education one receives today is hardly worth the trouble of getting up early in the mornings. The classes in the school I went to were much to crowded, sometimes having as much as 40 people in some compulsory courses such as English. Also because of this one can miss things in class which the teacher would not have time to redo because of the large numbers. A student could easily fall into bad reading and writing habits which would hamper his career.

...student,-teacher relationships should improve. If a student and a teacher get along well, I feel the student will get a lot more from the teacher.

I think the key is for much smaller classes.... When a student feels part of a class he is more apt to try harder.

The exceptional schools (I went to) were just the right size so that teachers knew their students individually, and in my mind this is very important. For the most part, my teachers knew the capabilities and the problems of mostly every student. This is especially true in junior high. I personally think that schools should have a limit on their size and the number of pupils in each class.

If some of the children in the lower grades can't catch on then the teacher should take a little extra time to show the students how to do it properly.

If everyone would take a little extra time to understand how something is done properly then many people would be better off.

Unfortunately, due to the break in the student-teacher cycle, they end up learning less.

More About Teachers' Incompetence

Teachers do not have enough training in special problems. They should be able to recognize difficulties and help the student overcome them before difficulties turn into problems.

In some of the classes you might propose an idea to the teacher. He or she would then say that the teacher was right and the student was wrong and this would end the student's idea.

Teachers should be instructed to teach reading and writing skills if professors are complaining.